

Policy Watch: Moscow's Lebanon policy

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The fighting that erupted between Israel and Hezbollah last month has resulted in Russian officials issuing numerous statements, but not taking much action. These statements consisted of:

- Calls for an immediate cease-fire (as many other countries also called for, but not the United States and Israel which hoped for an Israeli defeat of Hezbollah first);
- Criticisms of Hezbollah for its kidnapping of the two Israeli soldiers which started the conflict, and also of Israel for undertaking a "disproportionate" response against it;
- Warnings that the conflict might spread to other countries if it did not end soon;
- Denials of Israeli charges that Hezbollah was attacking it with Russian-made missiles that it obtained from Syria (despite mounting evidence that this is indeed what happened); and
- Calls for a U.N. Security Council resolution that was "balanced" and took into account "the interests of all sides," including those of the Lebanese government and even Hezbollah.
- There was an apparent difference of opinion within the Russian government over whether Moscow should participate in a U.N. peacekeeping operation in southern Lebanon following a cease-fire. Both Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov and Presidential Aide Sergei Prikhodko indicated that Russia would not contribute soldiers to a peacekeeping force. The Russian Foreign Ministry, though stated that Moscow was "studying" or "considering" doing just this. Members of the Duma were said to be divided on the issue. The fact that no Russian force contribution to the U.N. peacekeeping mission has been announced suggests that the forces opposed to it have the upper hand in this debate -- for now.

On July 28, Moscow published an "official list" of what the Russian government regards as terrorist organizations. This list did not include either Hezbollah or Hamas. The publication of this list, however, did not appear to be related to the ongoing fighting but to Moscow's concerns over Chechnya instead. Hezbollah and Hamas were said to have been left off the list because they were not involved in terrorist actions against Russia or regarded as terrorist groups worldwide. Moscow may have done this as part of its public relations campaign directed at Muslims aimed at suggesting that since Russia agreed with the Muslim world that Hezbollah and Hamas are legitimate opposition movements, the Muslim world should join Russia in regarding Chechen and other Muslim opposition movements in Russia and the former USSR as illegitimate.

In the U.N. Security Council, Russia has largely supported the Franco-American initiative for a cease-fire. When Lebanon objected to some of the provisions in the draft resolution, Russia backed Beirut. But since Lebanese cooperation was crucial for the cease-fire to have a chance to succeed, the United States and France were going to have to modify the text in order to obtain Lebanese concurrence with the peacekeeping plan anyway.

Frustrated at the continued fighting that was occurring while consensus could not be achieved on an overall U.N. Security Council cease-fire resolution with a peacekeeping plan, Russia said it would propose an immediate 72-hour humanitarian cease-fire. But the Russian ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, made clear that Moscow was not competing with the United

States and France for the role of peacemaker, and that it would not put the 72-hour resolution to a vote if Washington and Paris proposed a permanent cease-fire resolution acceptable to all sides. Shortly after this, a permanent cease-fire resolution was agreed upon and the Russian proposal for a 72-hour cease-fire became moot. The chairman of Russia's Federation Council, Sergei Mironov, claimed that Moscow's proposal for a temporary cease-fire was the catalyst for passage of the resolution on a permanent one.

There were numerous reports of Russian officials consulting with their counterparts in other governments, including Syria and Iran, about the conflict and how to resolve it. Shortly after it began, Sergei Ivanov even declared that "Russia is ready to use its contacts with Hamas for settling the current crisis in the Middle East." There is little evidence from the public record, though, that Moscow seriously attempted to persuade Hamas, (or more importantly) Syria and Iran to restrain Hezbollah. If it tried to do so privately, it does not appear to have succeeded. The leader of the Lebanese parliamentary majority, Saad Hariri, did ask Moscow "to take advantage of its relations with Israel to help secure an immediate cease-fire." Although Moscow publicly called for a cease-fire throughout the crisis, Israel largely ignored it. Nor did Israel finally agree to one to please Moscow.

There do not appear to have been any direct public contacts between the Russian government and Hezbollah. Hezbollah politburo member and Lebanese MP Amin Shari was quoted by a Russian newspaper as saying, "Hezbollah has not yet established direct links with Russian representatives." This is somewhat surprising considering that there are now duly elected Hezbollah members in the Lebanese parliament. Moscow justified establishing contact with Hamas on the basis of its electoral victory in January 2006. Unlike Hezbollah, though, Hamas won a majority of seats in its election.

Since conflict between Israel and Hezbollah erupted shortly before the Group of Eight summit that Putin hosted in St. Petersburg, this crisis was one of the top concerns in the discussions there. In addressing the issue, Putin seemed to make a concerted effort to appear diplomatic and even-handed. After a meeting with President George W. Bush on July 15, for example, Putin said, "We believe Israel's concerns are well-grounded. It's inadmissible to press for one's goals, political or otherwise, by using force, kidnapping people, or delivering strikes at the territory of one country from another country. But the use of retaliatory force must be proportionate. Bloodletting must be stopped as early as possible." Putin has been publicly involved in the diplomacy of this crisis since then (he spoke about it, for instance, in telephone conversations with British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Aug. 6, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Aug. 11, and Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi on Aug. 22). For the most part, though, he has left it to his subordinates to make pronouncements on the crisis.

This is very different from his reaction to Hamas's electoral victory in January 2006. The invitation for a Hamas delegation to visit Moscow shortly thereafter was extended by Putin himself, and appears to have been very much his own initiative. Of course, Putin was disappointed in his apparent expectation that Hamas would use the occasion of the visit to Moscow to back down from its radical position and accept the conditions for talking to it (recognizing Israel, renouncing violence, and honoring previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements) laid down by the Quartet. It may have been this disappointing experience with Hamas that influenced Putin not to make a similar effort with Hezbollah.

On the whole, Russian foreign policy has sought to convey an image of Moscow strongly contributing to efforts to resolve the Lebanese crisis while actually avoiding any serious involvement in it and the risks that this would entail. This may not be the foreign policy to be expected from a great power. But it certainly has been that of a prudent one.

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